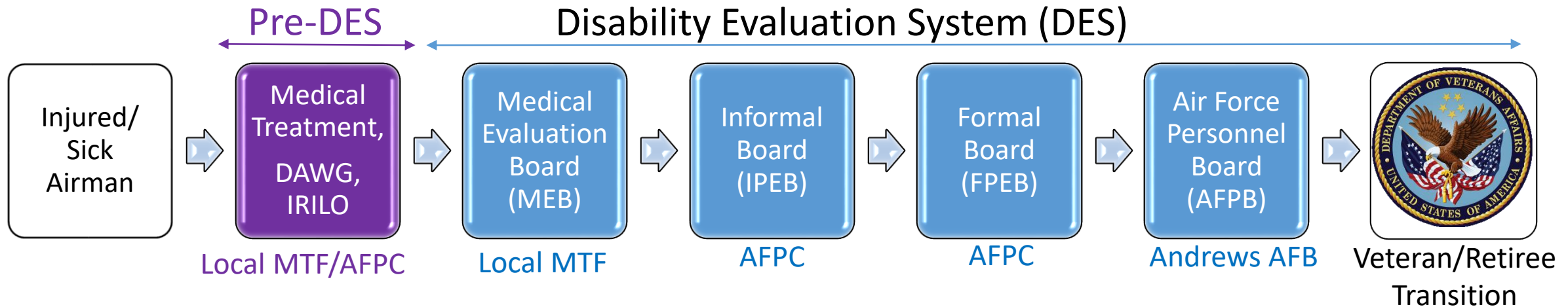


# Air Force Disability Evaluation System (DES)



# Disability Roadmap for Wounded, Injured or Ill Airmen



Click on any of the purple or blue boxes above for a more detailed explanation of each part of the process.

Click [HERE](#) for an estimated timeline.

## Purpose

The purpose of the Air Force Disability Evaluation System is to maintain a fit and vital force. To this end, the Air Force DES may remove an active duty, Air Force Reserve, or Air National Guard Airman from military service who can no longer reasonably perform the duties of the office, grade, rank or rating. The DES ensures fair compensation to Airmen whose military careers are cut short due to a service-incurred or service-aggravated medical condition.

## Pre-DES

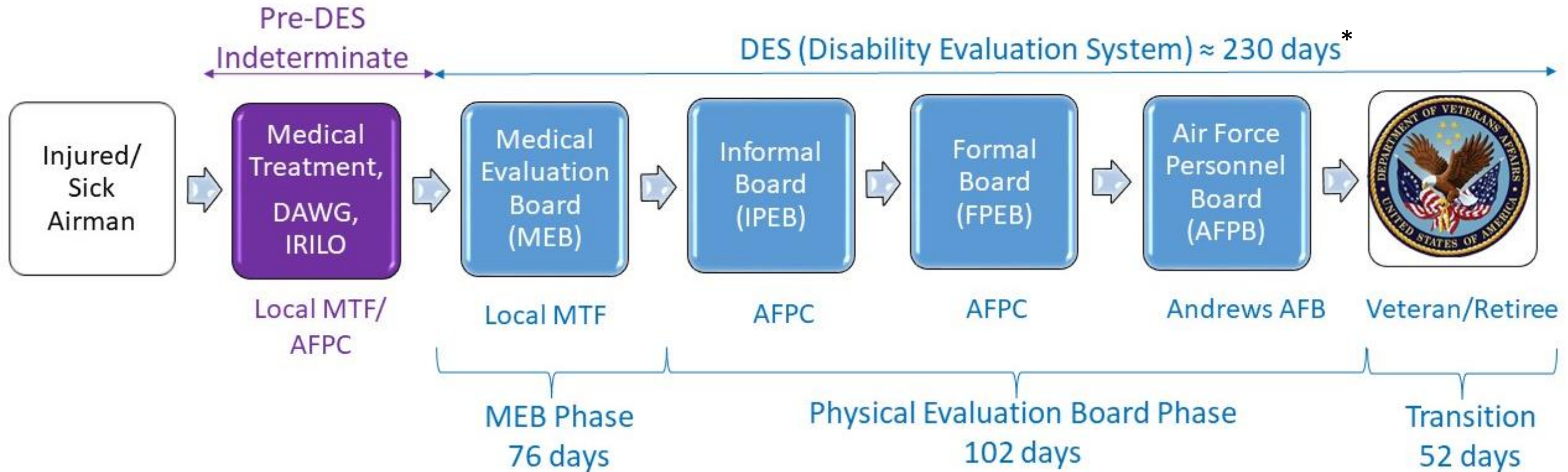
There are three elements which precede referral to the DES. They are medical treatment, the Deployment Availability Working Group and the Initial Review in Lieu Of process.

## DES Components

There are four main components of the DES: the Medical Evaluation Board, the Informal Physical Evaluation Board, the Formal Physical Evaluation Board and the Air Force Personnel Board. The AFPB is a component board of the Secretary of the Air Force Personnel Council, or SAFPC.

For more information, select "Any" from the dropdown menu on <https://mypers.af.mil/> and search "DES."

# Air Force DES Timeliness Standards



\*DES timeline standards are established by DoD. The 230 day standard is based on 80% of cases meeting that timeframe. Many cases will be significantly less than 230 days, primarily dependent on whether or not Airmen appeal their case. Some cases will take longer than 230 days.

## General Expectations

- **The information on this website is meant to supplement the counseling an Airman's Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officer (PEBLO) provides regarding the Air Force DES. If an Airman has specific questions about their disability case, call their PEBLO immediately.**
- **Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officers (PEBLO's).** When an Airman develops a medical condition and is referred to the Air Force DES, they are appointed a PEBLO to assist them throughout the process. The PEBLO is the main point of contact between the service member, the family, the member's chain of command, the VA, and the PEB throughout the Air Force DES.
- **Airmen have an active role in their case.** Airmen have rights and opportunities to participate in their disability evaluation. Airmen may seek the advice and assistance from local base level legal office, the Office of Airmen's Counsel (OAC), a veterans' representative of their choice, or a civilian attorney (at their own expense). It's critical Airmen attend all appointments and examinations.
- **Each case is unique.** Each case in the DES is evaluated on numerous factors unique to the individual, including, but not limited to years of service, rank, rating, fitness limitations, deployment and assignment requirements, treatment history and prognosis. While a provider, PEBLO, attorney, or another Airman who has gone through the process may give an Airman an idea of what to expect based on their experiences, never assume a particular outcome.
- Before an Airman is referred into the DES, their doctors' and the Air Force medical community work very hard to ensure they have reached maximal medical outcome. There are several steps in the process of treating the Airmen's condition(s) and it often takes months if not years, with the hope that the condition(s) resolve and the Airman is returned to duty. Most cases are handled at the MTF or with an IRILO and never make it to the DES. Therefore, it should come as no surprise, for those cases who enter the DES, the **IPEB's historical average of return to duty decisions is less than 5 percent.** Therefore, Commanders and First Shirt's should help their Airmen navigating the DES take steps to prepare for the strong likelihood of separation or retirement, including early participation in the Transition Assistance Program.



- **Referral.** An Airman will be referred to the DES when their course of recovery is relatively predictable or within 1 year of diagnosis for the following:
  1. Medical conditions that prevent an Airman from performing the duties of their office, grade, rank, or rating.
  2. Medical conditions that represent an obvious medical risk to the health of the member or safety of other members.
  3. Medical conditions that impose unreasonable requirements on the military to maintain or protect an Airman.
- **Difference between the Air Force DES and the VA.** Because an Airman has a diagnosis does not necessarily mean the Airman will be found unfit for the same condition by the Air Force DES. The Air Force's standard in evaluating an Airman (see "Referral" above) is different than the standard applied by the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). The VA will evaluate and rate all medical conditions related to active military service.
  - **Example:** A TSgt with 12 years of service has five conditions: degenerative arthritis, seizure disorder, sleep apnea, acne, and tinnitus. The VA considered and rated all five conditions. While the Air Force DES considered each of the TSgt's diagnoses, only the degenerative arthritis and seizure disorder were found unfitting and rated.
- **Difference between LDES and IDES.** The DES provides for two different procedures to process an Airman through the Air Force Disability DES because of an illness or injury; the Legacy Disability Evaluation System (LDES) and the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). The LDES process is similar to the IDES except it doesn't involve the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), meaning the process can, on average, be faster. Commanders and Airmen should discuss with their PEBLO if interested in the LDES option, as the IDES is now standard unless specific circumstances warrant.
- **Information, support and guidance is available!** Airmen referred to the Air Force DES should keep in contact with their PEBLO, commander, First Sergeant, supervisor, provider and others who can provide support and guidance, to include the [Air Force Wounded Warrior Program](#) for those Airmen who qualify. The PEBLO will help Airmen navigate through the Disability Evaluation System and can answer questions about the process. If an Airman needs legal advice on their case, contact the Office of Airmen's Counsel at DSN 665-0739 or (210) 565-0739 or [afloaja.disabilitycounsel@us.af.mil](mailto:afloaja.disabilitycounsel@us.af.mil).



### **Pre-DES Processes**

The part of the process prior to entering the Disability Evaluation System (DES) is centered on the medical treatment of one or more conditions which may render an Airman unable to perform the duties of their office, grade, rank or rating. Most conditions are successfully treated and resolved within a 12-month period. For those who remain restricted beyond 12 months of treatment or whose prognosis may not be favorable for recovery, the Deployment Availability Working Group, or DAWG may be engaged. The DAWG comprises the second of the three pre-DES elements. The DAWG meets at least monthly to review personnel with a duty limiting condition that affects mobility, retention, or long-term physical fitness. DAWG members (identified in AFI 10-203, paragraph 4.1.2) review the condition, treatment, progress and prognosis and determine whether or not the case requires evaluation for potential referral to the DES. If it does, the DAWG will refer the case to Air Force Medical Retention Standards, located at the Air Force's Personnel Center. Medical Retention Standards, referred to as DP2NP, conducts a final review and either returns the member to duty, potentially with an Assignment Limitation Code (ALC), returns the case for additional information, or refers the case to the DES.



### **Medical Evaluation Board (MEB)**

The first step in the Air Force Disability Evaluation System (DES) is referral to a Medical Evaluation Board (MEB), which will document whether or not the Airman can perform the duties of their office, grade, rank, or rating. The MEB is conducted at the local Military Treatment Facility (MTF).



The MEB consists of three physicians (in the case of a mental health condition, a psychiatrist or doctorate psychologist must be present on the Board). The results of the MEB are recorded on an AF Form 618, Medical Board Report, and the Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officer (PEBLO) briefs the Airman at the local MTF. Commanders provide their input via the AF Form 1185, *Commander's Impact Statement to the Medical Evaluation Board*. The AF Form 1185 documents the impact an Airman's condition has on the mission. The MEB will refer potentially unfitting cases to the Informal Physical Evaluation Board (IPEB), located at the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) on Joint Base San Antonio – Randolph.

Airmen have the **right to an Impartial Medical Review (IMR)** conducted with a physician or other appropriate health care professional who is independent of the MEB. The purpose of an IMR is to:

1. Serve as an independent source of review of the MEB findings and recommendations, and
2. Advise and counsel the Service member regarding the findings and recommendations of the MEB, and
3. Advise the Service member on whether the MEB findings adequately reflect the complete spectrum of the Service member's injuries and illnesses.

In addition, Service members referred into the DES will, upon request, be permitted at least one rebuttal of the MEB findings.

As part of the MEB process, Airmen submit a claim and undergo examination(s) for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability pay and benefits at the same time. The VA examination(s) and disability ratings are important inputs to the Air Force DES to determine fitness for duty and compensation. VA disability rating percentages for each diagnosis are assigned in accordance with the Veterans Administration Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD) and are based on the severity of the medical condition such as limitation in motion, laboratory values, or functional / occupational impact. A VA Military Service Coordinators (MSC) helps Airmen through this process which also ensures their VA benefits can be paid as soon as possible after they separate from service.

For Airmen not returned to duty, the next step of the disability evaluation process is the IPEB.





### **Informal Physical Evaluation Board (IPEB)**

The Informal Physical Evaluation Board (IPEB) is an administrative board within the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC), charged with determining whether wounded, ill or injured Airmen are fit for continued military service. The IPEB conducts a records only review of the Medical Evaluation Board (MEB) package and will decide whether to return Airmen to duty or to recommend disability separation or retirement. The IPEB gives careful consideration to each Airman's disability case to ensure each Airman receives the benefit of a full and fair adjudication in accordance with [DoD Instruction 1332.18](#), *Disability Evaluation System* and [Air Force Instruction \(AFI\) 36-3212](#), *Physical Evaluation for Retention Retirement and Separation*.

The IPEB will determine what medical conditions, if any, make an Airman unfit for continued military service. Fitness for duty is based on numerous factors, including but not limited to years of service, rank, the medical condition's impact on an Airman's duties, fitness limitations, deployment and assignment requirements, treatment history and the prognosis for the condition. According to Air Force Disability Evaluation System (DES) policy, an Airman may be found unfit for continued service if a medical condition:

- Makes the member unable to reasonably perform duties of his or her office, grade, rank, or rating, or
- Represents a decided medical risk to the health of the member or to the welfare or safety of others, or
- Imposes unreasonable requirements on the military to maintain or protect the Service member

### **Unfit for Duty**

If the IPEB finds an Airman unfit for continued service, the IPEB will send the case to the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) and request a proposed VA rating decision. Upon receipt of the VA decision, the IPEB will apply the VA diagnostic codes and disability rating percentages to their decision to determine a final outcome.

The VA proposed rating decision is derived using the [Veterans Administration Schedule for Rating Disabilities](#) (VASRD). VASRD percentage ratings are based on the severity of a diagnosis using range of motion limitations, laboratory findings, or functional impact. While the VA rates all service-connected conditions, the IPEB will only apply ratings for unfitting conditions.

Disability separation or retirement will be based on service connection and years of service or the combined VA disability rating for unfitting conditions. If an unfitting medical condition existed prior to military service and was not permanently aggravated in service, individuals will not be eligible for compensation and will be discharged without benefits. For additional information, see [MyPers](#) or ask the Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officer (PEBLO).

**Fit for Duty:** If the IPEB finds an Airman fit for duty, they do not have the right to a Formal Board as a fit finding is not considered a derogatory finding. An Airman may request a Formal Board and the Physical Disability Division (DPFD) Chief will either grant or deny the request (see AFI 36-3212, 3.34.2.3). Airmen returned to duty, depending on the individual circumstances, may be designated with a C1, C2, or C3 Assignment Limitation Codes (ALC's) that will indicate under what conditions their potential assignments to overseas or deployed locations will be limited and whether or not a waiver to such locations will be required.

In accordance with title [10 U.S.C, section 1214a](#), Airmen cannot be involuntarily administratively separated due to unsuitability based on the medical condition for which the DES found them fit (unless the Secretary of Defense authorizes). The Secretary of the Air Force may direct an Airman reenter the DES process to be reconsidered for a medical discharge.

## What's Next

Once the IPEB has made a determination, the staff will forward the AF Form 356, *Findings and Recommended Disposition of USAF Physical Evaluation Board* back to the MTF. The PEBLO will notify the Airman's commander and brief both on the IPEB results. The PEBLO will counsel each Airman on the time requirements to make an election. The Airman must choose one of the three below options:

- 1. Agree with the IPEB decision.**
- 2. Agree with IPEB decision but request VA reconsideration** of the disability ratings for the unfitting conditions. Airmen must submit documentation in support of their request or reconsideration will not be given. The VA will only reconsider their unfitting conditions; all other disability ratings may be readdressed following their separation/retirement from active service.
- 3. Disagree with the IPEB decision and appeal to the [Formal Physical Evaluation Board \(FPEB\)](#).** If they request a FPEB hearing, Airmen may request VA reconsideration of disability ratings at a later time. If the IPEB recommended returned to duty, justification must accompany the request for a formal hearing and request may be disapproved. Airmen do not have the right to a Formal Board if the IPEB has recommended return to duty since a Fit finding is not considered a derogatory finding. If an Airman make this election, expect a hearing date to the Formal Board as soon as 10 days after informing the PEBLO of that decision.



**NOTE: Limited Assignment Status (LAS):** Once an Airman accepts a PEB unfitting decision, those with 15 years of active federal service but less than 20 years of service, can apply for Limited Assignment Status (LAS). Per Air Force Instruction 36-3212, Chapter 6, the Chief, AFPC/DPFD Physical Disability Division (or designee) may approve Airmen for LAS when there is a need for the member's skill, experience, grade or specialty, have an essentially stable medical condition, and are able to function in a normal military environment without adverse effect on their health, the health/safety of others and without need for an excessive amount of medical care. Additional information on LAS is available on [MyPers](#).

**REMINDER:** Before an Airmen is referred into the DES, their doctors' and the Air Force medical community work very hard to ensure they have reached maximal medical outcome. There are several steps in the process of treating the Airmen's condition(s) and it often takes months if not years, with the hope that the condition(s) resolve and the Airman is returned to duty. Most cases are handled at the MTF or with an IRILO and never make it to the DES. **Therefore, it should come as no surprise, for those cases who enter the DES, the IPEB's historical average of return to duty decisions is less than 5 percent.** Therefore, Commanders and First Shirt's should help their Airmen navigating the DES take steps to prepare for the strong likelihood of separation or retirement, including early participation in the Transition Assistance Program.

Airmen have the right to legal advice on their DES case and legal representation by the Office of Airmen's Counsel (OAC) at no expense. The OAC consists of attorneys who provide legal services to Airmen who are going through the DES. The OAC may be contacted at DSN (312) 665-0739, commercial (210) 565-0739 or [afloaja.disabilitycounsel@us.af.mil](mailto:afloaja.disabilitycounsel@us.af.mil). They may also seek the advice and assistance at the local base legal office, with a Veteran Service Officer (VSO), or with a non-Air Force affiliated attorney (at their own expense).



### **Formal Physical Evaluation Board (FPEB)**

Formal Physical Evaluation Board (FPEB) hearings are held at JBSA-Randolph AFB in San Antonio, Texas. Airmen have the right to personally attend their hearing (either in person, over the phone or via video-teleconferencing), the right to receive assistance from an attorney, and to provide new documentation and witness testimony. The FPEB will provide a full and fair hearing of the Medical Evaluation Board (MEB) case file and consider any additional documentation submitted, an Airman's testimony and the testimony of any witnesses. The FPEB gives careful consideration to each Airman's disability case to ensure each receives the benefit of a full and fair adjudication in accordance with disability policy.

The FPEB is a non-adversarial hearing with three officers (or civilian equivalent), one of which is a medical officer. The Board members may also ask questions to clarify the documentation or the testimony. The hearing will be recorded. Unless the case is decided based upon an administrative review of the evidence without need for a hearing, results will typically not be given until the Airman returns to their unit.

Each Airmen has the right to the assistance of an attorney in presenting their case before the FPEB. The **Office of Airmen's Counsel (OAC)** provides legal counsel and representation at no expense. An Airman may also retain a non-Air Force affiliated attorney of their choice at their expense or request the assistance of the representative of a veteran's organization.

Those Airmen traveling to their hearing will be provided TDY orders to arrive one day prior to their hearing. This will allow them time to confer with their attorney and finalize preparation for their hearing. Any requests for delay of FPEB reporting must be submitted through their attorney or PEBLO and the FPEB President must approve.

The PEBLO will provide the Airman a reporting date and reporting instructions for their hearing. A reporting date may occur within 10 days of an Airman's IPEB election.

Air Force Reserve or Air National Guard members pending separation for non-duty related (Not in the Line of Duty) disabilities who appeal the IPEB fitness for duty recommendation travel to the FPEB at their own expense.



Airmen may have witnesses provide testimony at their FPEB hearing; however, the Air Force does not cover the costs associated with witness travel, lodging, etc. unless the FPEB specifically request the testimony.

Commanders and the MTF should carefully consider whether an escort is needed. An authorized escort, to include a spouse or other caregiver, may be appropriate when the Airman is not physically or mentally able to travel without assistance. Other family members and Wingmen are welcome to accompany the member, but must do so at personal or unit expense.

Once the FPEB has completed adjudication, the staff will forward the AF Form 356, Findings and Recommended Disposition of USAF Physical Evaluation Board to the PEBLO. The PEBLO will notify the Airman's commander and brief both on the FPEB results. The Airman should consult with their attorney and decide whether to accept the FPEB's recommendation. The Airman may make one of three decisions:

- 1) **Agree with the FPEB decision.**
- 2) **Agree with FPEB decision but request VA reconsideration** of the disability ratings for their unfitting conditions. The Airman must submit documentation in support of their request within 10 days or reconsideration will not be given. The VA will only reconsider the unfitting conditions; all other disability ratings may be readdressed following the Airman's separation/retirement from active service.
- 3) **Disagree with the FPEB decision and submit a rebuttal to the [Air Force Personnel Board \(AFPB\)](#).** The AFPB is the final board of appeal for members being processed through the Air Force Disability Evaluation System (DES), other than the Board for Correction of Military Records (BCMR). Airmen must submit their rebuttal within 10 calendar days of their request to appeal. The Board will review the case file, the audio transcript of the formal hearing, and any written rebuttal and make a final disposition. If an Airman requests appeal to the Air Force Personnel Board, they may request VA reconsideration of disability ratings following the Board's decision.

**NOTE: Limited Assignment Status (LAS):** Once an Airman accepts a PEB unfitting decision, those with 15 years of active federal service but less than 20 years of service, can apply for Limited Assignment Status (LAS). Per Air Force Instruction 36-3212, Chapter 6, the Chief, AFPC/DPFD Physical Disability Division (or designee) may approve Airmen for LAS when there is a need for the member's skill, experience, grade or specialty, have an essentially stable medical condition, and are able to function in a normal military environment without adverse effect on their health, the health/safety of others and without need for an excessive amount of medical care. Additional information on LAS is available on [MyPers](#).



### **Air Force Personnel Board (AFPB)**

The Air Force Personnel Board (AFPB), located at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland, is a component board of the Secretary of the Air Force Personnel Council (SAFPC). The AFPB reviews and acts on personnel matters, including acting as the final appellate authority for all Air Force members in the Air Force Disability Evaluation System (DES) (Title 10 U.S.C. Chapters 61 and 69; and AFI 36-3212). The AFPB is an administrative board which conducts a records-only review when an Airman disagrees with the findings of a Formal Physical Evaluation Board (FPEB), as documented after PEBLO counseling of the Formal Board findings and a member's election on AF Form 1180.



The authority of the Air Force Personnel Board is set forth in the governing statutes and instructions (regulations) applicable to the underlying personnel action, in this case AF Instruction 36-3212 *Physical Evaluation for Retention Retirement and Separation*, or as provided for in Secretarial delegations and policy memoranda.

Based on the application of accepted medical principles, the AFPB identifies the principles at issue, and relates the issue to the facts and circumstances established in the record of the proceedings of the PEB. The AFPB may change the findings and recommended disposition of the PEB. When this happens, the AFPB documents and describes the basis for the change.

Similar to a Formal Physical Evaluation Board, Airmen have the right to the assistance of an attorney in presenting their case before the AFPB. The Office of Airmen's Counsel (OAC) provides legal counsel and representation at no expense. Airmen may also retain a non-Air Force affiliated attorney of their choice at their expense or request the assistance of the representative of a veteran's organization.

## **References**

- [AFI 36-3212, Physical Evaluation for Retention Retirement and Separation](#)
- [AFI 36-2023, The Secretary of the Air Force Personnel Council and the Air Force Personnel Board](#)
- [DoDI 1332.18, Disability Evaluation System](#)
- [Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records](#)
- [Air Force Wounded Warrior Program](#)
- [Air Force Transition Assistance Program](#)
- [Combat Related Special Compensation \(CRSC\)](#)
- [Title 10, Chapter 61—Retirement or Separation for Physical Disability \(sections 1201 to 1222\)](#)